"To promote understanding and appreciation of the religious and spiritual values which abide in the processes and relationships of agriculture and rural life; to define their significance and relate them to the Christian enterprise at home and abroad."

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The Kind of Rural Church I Would Like to Have in My Community

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My only claim to eligibility in discussing this subject is the fact that I am a rural homemaker, a mother and an interested church member. Our family has lived in the same farm home for 93 years. During that time they have attended the same church in a near-by country village--a church that is more than a hundred years old. My sons were baptized in this church and two of them have been trustees.

The membership of our church is small and typically rural and made up, largely, of families like our own who have been members for three or four generations. This continuity of membership must be one of the ideals for which our parents and grandparents lived and labored. One would expect such a congregation to be very loyal--loyal to family, to community, to the pastor, and to the church. The same members are found practically every Sunday morning, in practically the same pews. They are there for the renewed inspiration and spiritual help they know they will receive.

What else do we have a right to expect of our church and in what way would a rural and urban church differ?

We have a right to expect the church to minister to the spiritual and social needs of the family, to correlate all agencies for community betterment and to promote and stimulate American democracy. The social and economic needs of a rural community must of necessity differ from urban centers.

The rural church must be a friendly church, looking after the sick, the needy, the absent ones and the new-comer in the midst. Here is an opportunity to practice genuine Christian brotherhood and neighborliness. Church members must care enough for those about them to do the things that need to be done to reach the people of the community. We must be willing "to minister to and love even the least of these, my brethren." Any church which does not serve the needs of its people is doomed to failure. The church must also keep abreast of changed conditions and be able to interpret and apply to everyday living the teachings of the Bible.

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*This paper was presented at the meeting of the Christian Rural Fellowship held November 7, 1940, at Lafayette, Indiana, in cooperation with the Indiana Rural Life Council and the American Country Life Association. Mrs. Perdue describes herself as "a rural homemaker, a mother and an interested church member." Her home is Locust Hill Farm, Acton, Indiana.

People are no longer interested in a religion that is made up of symbols, doctrines, and philosophy without meaning to our present world. We are not nearly so concerned about the promises of future awards as we are about the problems that are confronting us here and now. As my beloved father, who is 81 years old, has often said, "Dying is not the big problem but living courageously, day by day as our Master would have us do." Someone else has said that "true religion is a heightened awareness of the poetry of existence," or as the New Testament has put it, "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Beyond question, the prime need of the world today is a purposeful religion. Without it, individuals and nations have lost their way. It will only be through God's love, mercy, and truths that we will find the way back.

Because of that fact the opportunity of the rural church for leadership has enormously broadened. No other one institution can reach and influence so large a number of rural people of all ages as the rural church. It can assume a new place of importance by demonstrating what Christ meant by "the more abundant life."

Too many of the present generation think of religion as a system of "trivial taboos" instead of a source of deep spiritual satisfaction. Channing Pollock says, "You can tell Mr. and Mrs. John Q. Citizen that it is important to be decent and honest, but you can't tell them that it is wrong to go swimming on Sunday." They wouldn't stop swimming but they would stop going to church. Recently, I heard a radio speaker say, "Give the farm boy a gun, a lop-eared hound and some fishing tackle. Let him spend his leisure hours (even a part of Sunday if he desires, after first attending Sunday school and church) in the woods or along the creek bank. The chances are that he will become a better citizen--one who will have a reverence for God, for His great out-of-doors and for the laws of nature." We are in a world of constant change where life is a matter of progress and growth. What is right or wrong has been, is, and always will be the eternal question of the ages.

The doctrine of the ideal church is one which recognizes God, the Father, His Son, and redemption from sin, by filling our minds and hearts with more noble thoughts that center around the Father, and His divine Son--in other words, "a way of life," filled with interesting, worth while, beautiful service. Religion to many people is merely believing certain things, rather than love, charity, tolerance, understanding and good works, and Christ said, "By their works ye shall know them."

The kind of church I would want in my community would be interested in promoting a live Sunday school, which is indispensable since three-fourths of the additions to the church come through the Sunday school. Boys and girls who miss the religious training afforded by Sunday school miss an invaluable something that they will never get elsewhere.

The decline in Sunday school attendance may be partly due to the indifference of parents but in many instances the Sunday school, itself, is at fault. Not having competent leadership, it falls into a rut. Too often there is no school spirit; the teacher fails to make a convincing application of the truth of the lesson. We fail to give younger members individual responsibilities which would create interest and that, in turn, would help to develop leadership. We need superintendents who have a vital, personal faith--who

take time to pray and to plan--who have executive ability and who dare to introduce new features and new methods. Let's remember the significant fact that no organization or institution can long survive whose membership is not made up of at least one-third of its young people.

Another reason for the slipping and decline of rural churches is that many communities allow their churches to become unkempt and unattractive. A former citizen of a certain community returned after an absence of 40 years to find himself almost a stranger. The old home had been torn down and replaced by a modern dwelling; the little red school-house had given way to a fine consolidated building; the mud roads had been paved. Only one familiar object remained--the old church was just as he remembered it--older, more weather-beaten, but it had been overlooked and passed by in the march of progress.

Another story of poignant interest was told by Ruth St. Denis, the artist. She was reared a Methodist and remained essentially religious though in her later years she had little opportunity to attend services. One Sunday, in a small town, she learned of her mother's death and the old impulse asserted itself. "The church," she said, "was hideous; the fence broken, and the lawn unkempt. I entered. The walls were damp. A bad organist played dirges on a wheezy organ, and four people who couldn't sing made an attempt; then a preacher who couldn't talk did so hrough his nose. I fled. I hate motion pictures but I finished that morning listening to a small symphony orchestra in a movie theatre, because there was <u>life</u> there!"

There are so many drab, little shacks called churches, empty of any kind of beauty. Certainly, they are not the kind of church I would want in my community. Our hills and woods are filled with native trees and shrubs that can be easily transplanted to beautify the grounds of both church and manse, also the cemetery that often adjoins.

Impoverished social and economic conditions during the depression years account in a large measure for the closing of many rural churches and the state of decay in which we find many other places of worship. Increased farm tenancy has unquestionably been a factor in decreased church membership and church income.

Rural ministers, for the most part, are underpaid. We expect them to be not only ministers and pastors but church janitors and errand-boys for the entire congregation. The supposition is, "the minister has plenty of time; let him do it." Sunday after Sunday many rural ministers face the discouragement of empty benches, of inadequate equipment and widely separated parishes, each seemingly poorer than the other. In spite of these handicaps these same ministers struggle to keep aloft the dignity of the country church and help train a leadership that is a necessary stimulus to not only the rural but the urban churches as well. Many rural ministers, unsung and unacclaimed, have left a profound influence upon the boys and girls of their communities.

Often a minister is not permitted to remain in one community long enough to leave an imprint on the lives with whom he comes in contact, for this cannot be done in three, four or even a half dozen years. Unfortunately, not all ministers are like the ones just mentioned. Some are like the old colored pastor who, when asked why he was a preacher, said, "The sun was so

hot, the work was so hard, and dis here nigger was so tired, I jest believed I was called to preach."

"The kind of church I would like to have in my community" would desire a minister who is interested not only in soul salvation but soil salvation--the saving and conserving of all human and material resources. He would want his church to definitely face and accept its opportunities in the social and economic problems of agriculture. We are told that it was the religious leaders of Denmark who led the economic revolution that remade that brave little country. We must recognize the fact that economic poverty and hardships are not conducive to spiritual uplift.

After hearing Sam Higginbottom last spring, I found myself wondering if every rural minister shouldn't approach his task in the same manner as the foreign missionary. The country church must help to keep the brightest youths on the farms; must help establish a tradition of continuity of family farm ownership and family church membership; to do this it would help if ministers lived on the soil, thus demonstrating both family life and farm life.

A brilliant sermon, splendidly delivered, is, in itself, not enough to build the spiritual life of a church and a community. The rural church needs a pastor who is a shepherd of his flock.

Sometime ago an Indiana rural minister gave me his card. I was so impressed with it that I kept it. We find the following printed on one side, "The pastor gladly offers his services and will esteem it a great favor to be informed of anyone needing the same. He will visit the aged, shut-in, sick, read and pray with them, attend funerals, whenever desired irrespective of church membership or non-membership. He particularly desires to get acquainted with and help so far as he may those who have no religious connection or church home." This same minister is helping to promote 4-H Club work in his county and is frequently called upon to be chaplain of club camps. You can readily understand why his church is one of the most active rural churches in the state.

We need to remember that the spiritual is not to be separated from the social and the economic, but should transfuse and transform both. Sometimes a church needs material objectives to help keep up the spiritual impetus of the congregation. How the ladies of a church will work together to raise enough money to redecorate, to rapair the organ or buy a new carpet! Too often when the goal is reached there is a physical and spiritual let-down. Jeremiah went a thousand miles--left the luxury of a court--to help build the walls of Jerusalem. There is still a need for a religious, social and cultural wall around every community in the country today. This is work that often falls to groups of organized women--church groups, federated clubs, home economics groups and many others.

We should be specially interested in the social activities promoted by the rural church for the church needs social life. The live church promotes such a program for "still waters are stagnate waters."

The kind of rural church I would want in my community would be interested in a diversified program that would help to keep young people happy

and contented on the farm; provide wholesome recreation and an opportunity to create and develop friendships; find time to promote hobbies, health and a more satisfying religious life with opportunities for service. These are the inalienable rights of every girl and boy reared on a farm. The church has an important part to play in such a program for it cannot and must not allow its homes and family life to deteriorate.

The greatest asset of any community is its boys and girls. Any church or community which does not realize this fact might as well close up shop. We are told that Loeb, the father of the boy who murdered a little child just for the thrill, said that "a man who makes six million dollars and loses his son has lost everything."

Several months ago a letter from a 17-year old girl in Indiana was published in one of our rural magazines. This is the letter: "Isn't there someone in every community who would take the responsibility of providing decent recreational places for young people? I hate road houses and the filth such places breed. It is a common opinion that young people like these places but they do not. Why not a community effort to provide good places to swim, dance, skate, and play tennis? Young people would help to establish such places but we need older leaders to direct and supervise." That letter is a challenge to every parent and every minister in rural America.

Leisure should mean taking the time and opportunity to build into our lives and the life of our community those things which will enrich both. My own church organized a Calendar Club three years ago. Its objective is to promote the spiritual and cultural life of our community. The devotional period is always stressed--otherwise the programs are varied--viz.: demonstrations on the art of homemaking, plays, book reviews, style shows, exhibits of handicrafts, hobbies, antiques, special music, luncheons, teas, etc. The programs have made such a big appeal that they are being copied by churches elsewhere. Practically every woman in our church belongs to this club. Then the membership is more than doubled by ladies who are non-members of our church. The monthly attendance always draws from three counties and on occasions has had representatives from five counties and once from seven. It is generally recognized as the most worth while organization ever promoted in our community. It also helps to carry the financial responsibilities of our church, contributing to Home and Foreign Missions, sending flowers to the sick and bereaved, and financing repairs on the church building.

Another social activity that is of interest goes back to pioneer days for its inspiration. A rural church in my home county promotes a Fox Drive during the winter months and a horse-pulling and horse-shoe pitching contest in the fall. The latter is equivalent to a county fair both in attendance and enthusiasm. Still another project being sponsored by some rural churches in our state is a Woman's Camp, which is in the nature of a spiritual retreat. There are periods for rest, study, prayer, and play. The women return home rejuvenated and inspired to be better homemakers and a greater help in community betterment.

Recently, I read of a Sunday school teacher in Vermont who gave fourteen Sunday afternoons in the year to hikes, over hills and dales, with the juniors. It was not always the same hills and dales and not always the same juniors, but the youngsters came to have a new appreciation of flowers,

birds, trees, hills, and streams. Someone will say, "Sunday should be a day of rest"--possibly for adults, but children feel no need of rest. It is a far cry from yesterday when parents considered the still child "a model child."

Our older Youth groups are having many wide-awake forums, discussing topics both interesting, vital, and varied. Such forums are helping young people to find themselves in the social, business, and religious life of today. These young people are a never-ending source of surprise and admiration--they are much less concerned about money than those of a previous generation, but gravely concerned about "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

The chaos that is rampant in the Old World today may sooner or later invade our beloved country. We tremble to think of the cultural and spiritual consequences, for a totalitarian world would probably be the end of the Christian Church as we know it. Americanism is more than flag-waving--it is doing everything humanly possible to save our own and the few remaining democracies.

Religion and democracy are inseparable, for democracy depends upon Christian ideals that respect the rights of others. The church, whether urban or rural, symbolizes the need for a wide-spread application of the Golden Rule, which if rightly observed would forever banish depression, wars, heartaches and miseries.

We need the church today as never before to direct our spiritual forces so we may develop strength of character, tolerance instead of intolerance, faith instead of fear--a faith great enough to offset the lack of moral stamina elsewhere in the world today.

When the smoke and din of world conquest are over, the church will face its greatest responsibility, restoring order out of ruin, rehabilitating lives and re-establishing homes.

It will be a new day for the rural church--a church (we hope) with denominational lines wiped out, one actively concerned with the spiritual, cultural and economic needs of family and community and perpetuating in our hearts and in our country, for all time to come, a permanent American democracy. It will be that day come true, referred to by the lowly Nazarene some 2,000 years ago, in that marvelous Sermon on the Mount, when he said, "Love thy neighbor as thyself...." for by that time we will be wise enough to "pool our prayers and consolidate our power" in "the kind of church we would like to have in our community."